

TAKE 5 otherness

1 Everyone can be an “other.”

Otherness is about being different because you have characteristics that set you apart from the dominant group or groups in a given context. Unlike “uniqueness,” which is often valued by the group, otherness is often used to devalue people.

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3 In many organizations, characteristics of the dominant group (the group that has decision-making power and influence), such as maleness, become normative—the default. Larry Page of Google is described simply as co-founder/CEO. But Mark Zuckerberg from Facebook is described as a 30-year old CEO. Meanwhile, Ursula Burns of Xerox is described as a female CEO—in fact, a female African-American CEO, and Indra Nooyi of PepsiCo is often introduced as a successful woman CEO of Indian origin. On the flip side, women taking care of patients in medical settings are called nurses, while men doing the same thing are often referred to as “male nurses.”

4 The common association of the dominant group with the position means that we only feel the need to specify group membership when it is non-dominant; that is, we only specify it when it is the “other” group. Moreover, the association of the dominant group with the position reinforces the belief that those holding that position are or should be from that group.

5 Inclusive leaders are aware of otherness and the impact it can have on individuals. Inclusive leaders not only can empathize with feelings of otherness, but are also willing to explore those feelings in themselves and let that experience inform them as leaders and influencers. The EACH framework's Courage and Humility leadership attributes are especially relevant to Otherness. Humility ensures that inclusive leaders are open to learning from others, and Courage helps them step out of their comfort zones in both understanding different people and role modeling the importance of doing so.